

A legal trade in horn would improve rhino protection and help sustainable development

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Southern white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) in an undisclosed game reserve, South Africa. Credit: Enrico Di Minin

The extinction in the wild of the southern white rhino population could be prevented by letting local communities take responsibility of the animals and giving them permission to harvest horns in a controlled manner through a legal trade. Rhino horn is made of the same material as human hair and fingernails and grows back in 2–3 years.

In 2013, more than 1000 rhinos were killed illegally for their horns in South Africa. Rhino horns are being used in Asia for traditional Chinese medicine and personal prestige. Now, a new study based on ecological and socio-economic models has found that the white rhino population in South Africa could go extinct in the wild in less than 20 years unless anti-poaching effort and monetary fines are increased to levels that would deter poachers. South Africa is more or less the only place where the white rhino remains in the wild.

The funding for rhino protection could be generated by a legal trade in rhino horn - something that has been banned since 1977.

"Our results suggest that enhancing rhino protection to levels that will discourage poaching will require raising tens of millions of dollars year after year just for rhino conservation when endless other uses for conservation resources exist," says Enrico Di Minin, research fellow at the University of Helsinki, Finland.

"The funding generated from a legal trade in rhino horn, instead, could be used to cover protection costs of rhino and other biodiversity and to generate sustainable income to poor [local communities](#)," he continues.

"Rhino horn could be harvested from individuals that die of natural causes; it can also be harvested from live animals with minimum risk to the [rhinos](#), as the horn is compressed hair, and it grows back if harvested," says Atte Moilanen, Professor at the University of Helsinki.

Yet, the authors of the study, including conservation scientists and practitioners from South Africa, Finland and the United Kingdom, warn on potential pitfalls. "Policy-makers in South Africa should be careful in advocating to lift a 35 year-old ban on rhino horn products unless the funding generated from the trade is re-invested in improved protection of the rhino population," says Rob Slotow, Professor at the University of

KwaZulu-Natal.

"An important contribution that the legal trade could make is to cover enhanced protection costs, at least in the short term, until other measures over some longer period lead to a reduction in demand from users in the Far East", concludes Di Minin.

Provided by University of Helsinki

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